

## **An Actor's Crisis**

- by *Miriam Marston*

*For my friends.*

\* \* \*

"Here, read this. It should give you some ideas."

The Manager tossed a thick book on the table. The binding had not yet been cracked. Charlie downed the last of his beer - *when did I even start drinking this?* - and picked up the book.

"What's the deal?"

The Manager gave one of his trademark sighs. Charlie was beginning to resent those sighs. He'd ask a simple question from time to time - a perfectly reasonable question - and his manager would give an enormous sigh, as though the question were a distasteful intrusion on his precious time.

"We talked about this, remember? We're trying a new strategy to expand the fan base. We're thinking it's about time you found religion. Or god. Or at least some variation on a transcendental topic. The latest figures reveal a trend - a trend that completely eludes my understanding, to be sure...anyways, there's been an uptick in numbers of people going around looking for supernatural meaning and value. The tabloids aren't doing you any favors right now among that soul-seeking demographic, so pick something...ideally by the end of the week. And if there's a corresponding tattoo, then get working on that, as well..."

The TV was on in the background. The reporter was in the middle of an in-depth story on the earth's water supply. With a tone of concern, she parroted the woman she was interviewing:

"Twenty years, you say?"

Charlie cracked the book open. The newscaster's impassioned report became suddenly drowned out by the sound of the manager's cell phone. He answered the call with a

"hey beautiful, can you hold on a sec" and turned to Charlie:

"Look through the book...figure it out...when in doubt, you could probably just start with the topic of death and move backwards from there..."

And with those words and a feeble wave, he left the room. Charlie briefly tried to guess which Beautiful was on the other line, and spent a moment wondering who or what he could call beautiful in his own life...but then his attention was pulled back to the book in his hand. *Right...focus...*

He had to admit that his manager had a point. The unfortunate incident with the vodka bottle and the Mercedes outside the club had gotten him into the news cycle for all the wrong reasons. And worse still, he was struggling against the critics of his latest film.

It was his turn to sigh now. He looked around.

He hated this room. It was big, purposefully unpainted, and sparsely furnished. But even the meager furnishings seemed pointless and random – like you could throw them away or break them, and no one would blink an eye.

*I suppose a little religion couldn't hurt.*

Would he even want to call it that in the press release, though? *Religion?* He'd never really liked the term, because it sounded so fixed and daunting. Only three syllables...although he acknowledged that those syllables had wreaked a lot of havoc down the centuries. *What about God?* God was a shorter word; and it seemed less risky and more malleable.

He didn't have strength for another sigh, so he yawned instead. Last night had tired him out so much, and there was a little part of him that wished he could fully remember why. He normally wouldn't have cared about not remembering, but for some reason, it was nagging him today. He scanned his memories – he recalled waking up right before sunset. Then a blur of images and sounds and sensations.

He licked his lips. They were parched.

With far more mental effort than is typically required for such an act, he got up from the couch and walked over to the water cooler. The only thing in the room worth having, in his opinion. *Man, I woke up on the wrong side of the bed...I shouldn't have even bothered to get up.*

The water was icy, and sent a jolt through Charlie's body. He coughed, and shook his head. The reporter – with the same kind of gusto she demonstrated in the prior story – was now recounting how a cat had successfully skateboarded halfway down Beckett Street.

As he watched the Famous Cat flash across the TV screen, his thoughts drifted to his Image. He ran a hand through his hair. He'd been told some years ago that his Tousled Hair scored well with a female demographic of a certain age, so they never disturbed that part of his look too much. Other than the calculated untidiness of his mane, his style was clean and straightforward. Although he never struggled in front of the camera, he'd never been much of a talker – friendly, but to the point. Not much beyond. *What's beyond the point, anyway?* Even on the red carpet, he kept the fashion and the conversation fairly casual...

*the red carpet...something about that red carpet...*

"And there he goes again! Turning onto Moore Road! Look at him go!"

The reporter's voice yanked Charlie back to the matter at hand.

In recent months, Charlie's career (and personal life, he might add, though his manager didn't seem as interested in how well or poorly Charlie's romantic relationships – or any relationships for that matter – were going) had been skidding across an arid plateau, headed nowhere remarkable. It was time for a boost back into the limelight. And the incident at the club was *not* going to be that boost. Yes, the actor's signature look and lifestyle needed some work.

After the incident, Charlie's manager brought a suggestion to a Public Relations Expert: that it was time for a stunt. Nothing criminal (they tabled that possibility for now), but something rebellious enough. The PR team and the Manager had pulled an all-nighter coming up with the perfect Stunt, while Charlie flirted with Stella. The two

acquaintances – though even that might have been too generous a term – crashed at a friend's place, and made the best of the spare bedroom on the third floor.

While Charlie was in the spare bedroom on the third floor, one of the PR Guys over on Spires Avenue came up with the scheme to Find Religion. There was a Consensus, and the PR team spent the rest of the hour huddled around the computer, combing the Internet for a good resource to pass along to Charlie.

The actor, however, wasn't convinced yet. Sure, he didn't take a lot of things too seriously, other than memorizing his lines, but there was the slightest whiff of danger with this latest publicity stunt. He felt like he was holding his hand too close to the fire.

He stared at the TV screen. It was a commercial for a holiday sale. This reminded Charlie that Thanksgiving was next week. He made a quick mental note to call his parents, though he'd have to double check where they were living. He didn't want to call them at some odd hour of the night. It might give him away.

He was still thirsty, and returned to his cup of water, which had warmed up a bit since his last attempt. He'd played a lot of different roles before...this one was going to require a certain caliber of effort that he wasn't accustomed to. Without even consulting the book in his hand, the headlines started to assemble in his mind...

***Charlie Stuart began praying on the set of his last film project after a close brush with death.***

Quite apart from the fact that he'd not had a close brush with death (but Facts were not as relevant here), he wasn't sure he liked that headline. He could already hear the follow-up question: "*so who do you pray to, then?*"

He was suddenly getting irritated at this imaginary reporter.

*Some jackass might want to know more. Put me on the spot. I don't know who the hell I'd be praying to, but praying sounded like something a spiritual person did.*

Charlie paused.

*Crap. What if someone asks me about hell? And what if they ask about suffering and evil? How should I know why that little kid got shot?*

His temper continued to rise, and he wanted to snap at someone, but he couldn't identify the target of his mounting anger. Instead, he took another sip of water. After all the liquor he'd consumed in the last day or so, the water tasted almost strange. Was it missing something, or was it everything? He couldn't quite decide.

***Charlie Stuart nodded, saying that he believed in the energy of the cosmos.***

No, that hypothetical sound byte didn't sit well with him, either.

His head started to hurt. It had been a long time since the last time he'd considered these questions. Years ago, at a family gathering, his parents had cornered him into a discussion about some issue – probably related to *morality*, though he couldn't remember the specifics, thank goodness. His parents said these matters were essential, but Charlie considered them to be peripheral at best. At first, he'd gotten angry, saying that he didn't give a fig. But his mom had turned on the waterworks, and he couldn't handle the drama, so he lied about giving a fig, and said he'd look into it and check back with them. Maybe at the next holiday gathering.

He thumbed through the index.

*Communion*  
*Cosmos*  
*Cross*  
*Death*  
*Devil*  
*End-times*  
*Eucharist*

He shuddered a bit at the word Devil. He couldn't help it, even though he didn't believe. Once, in a parking lot outside of the studio, a man was waving his hands wildly in the air, while laughing and screaming – the profanity was even beyond Charlie's taste. Drugs, probably. Never the devil.

Still made him shudder, though.

*Oneness  
Paradise*

He'd been to a few different clubs across the country called Paradise. Apparently, it was a popular name for those kinds of places. *And why not?* he thought. *How much closer to heaven can you get, when you're lost in music, friends, drinks and women?* He'd visited such a paradise the very night before. Hell, he might as well have authored this chapter of the book. He chuckled at himself, but stopped abruptly. The sound of his own laugh sounded weird to him.

*Start with death and work backwards.*

Why did his manager have to suggest that? The whole point of getting drunk was to ignore any messed-up thoughts about death. But he started to see it now: how not thinking about death had kept him from thinking about life. *Damn.* To think of one was to think about the other.

***Charlie Stuart insisted that his newfound beliefs would not have any effect on the characters he portrayed or on his personal life, which, he said with a knowing wink, would be "as fun and unpredictable as ever."***

It was as if the reporter on the TV was interrogating him, though he was pretty sure she was still talking about that couple who'd traveled to Pakistan to help with the distribution of food and aid. How could he have already forgotten about that devastating earthquake two weeks ago?

***Charlie Stuart agreed that people are fundamentally connected – with each other and with the rest of creation. Through that connectedness, we all become part of a higher consciousness.***

He sat down again. *When did I even stand up?* Yeah, he'd heard that one before. Never really got it. *Whose consciousness?* If he was going to be part of a higher consciousness, then he'd want to know whose effing consciousness he was part of.

And he didn't really want to be one with everyone else. The idea sounded nice when it was bounced around a cocktail party a few times, but deep down, he felt like he'd be losing part of who he was.

***'Love is love', Charlie asserted. These words got to the heart of what he believed.***

A faint echo of a teacher's voice rattled around his brain: "avoid the circular definitions, Charlie, they won't help you." He hadn't thought of that teacher in years. *What class had she taught? Geometry? What other subjects had to do with circles?*

***Charlie Stuart remarked that he followed his own truth, but respected everyone else's truth.***

His head really started to ache now, as he read through the start of the first chapter. Sure, it had been a few years, but he didn't recall reading to be such a painful activity. Why couldn't this be more like a script? His head never hurt when he read scripts.

"Charlie!"

The door flew open, and his manager – still on the phone – waved his hand furiously, to get his client's attention. The actor spilled the cup of water all over the book, but his manager hardly seemed to notice.

"Stop whatever you're doing...last minute invite to the *Wants and Words* premiere. Get ready to hit the carpet in two hours...what are you reading?"

\* \* \*

Charlie got out of the car, and the carpet sunk gently under his feet. Voices and lights buzzed and flashed around him, as the carpet stretched out in front of him – it stretched further than he could see...did it even have an end? He heard a dozen people yell his name, but he gave no expression or gesture in return.

"Charlie – turn to your left, they want a picture and a quote. Look to your left, Charlie!"

They were using his name, but surely, they were calling for someone else. Not him. That wasn't his name, was it?

He had never cared before about the color of the carpet. Why should he give it any thought? But now it

consumed him. It was red. So very red. Like blood. And with a shock, he remembered the blood running through his veins. How had he never noticed that he was alive and dead at the same time?

The breath caught in his lungs, as though he'd taken another sip of that icy water. It was the worst possible moment for it, but another headline rushed into his mind, unbidden and almost fierce:

***Charlie Stuart has returned to his spiritual roots, which began at St. Rita's Catholic Church in Lansing, MI.***

He actually laughed out loud at this one. This idea was the dumbest of them all, and the easiest one to shrug off.

His laughter trailed off, as his eyes widened.

**END**  
**(or: BEGINNING)**